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Cultural Geography of Kathak Dance: Streams of Tradition and Global Flows*

SUMMARY: The article deals with the modern history of Kathak, explored from regional perspectives. It focuses on the Lucknow *gharānā* (“school”) of Kathak, which sprung up mainly in courts and salons of colonial Avadh as a product of Indo-Islamic culture. The paper investigates how the shift of hereditary artists from Lucknow to Delhi affected their tradition in newly founded, state-supported institutions. It also examines various trends of further modernization of Kathak in globalized, metropolitan spaces. The tendency of Sanskritization in national dance institutes (Kathak Kendra) is juxtaposed with the preservation of ‘traditional’ form in dance schools of Lucknow (nowadays becoming more provincial locations of Kathak tradition) and innovative / experimental tendencies. The impact of regional culture, economic conditions and cosmopolitanism are regarded as important factors reshaping Kathak art, practice and systems of knowledge transmission. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork, combined with historical research, conducted in the period 2014–2015.

KEYWORDS: classical Indian dance, Kathak, Lucknow *gharānā*, Indo-Islamic culture.

* Much of the data referred to in this paper comes from the interviews with Kathak artists and dance historians which I conducted in India in 2014–2015 as part of two research projects: *The Role of Sanskrit Literature in Shaping the Classical Dance Traditions in India* (funded by École française d’Extrême-Orient), and *Transformation of the Classical Indian Dance Kathak in the Context of Socio-cultural Changes* (funded by National Science Center in Poland/NCN on the basis of decision no. DEC-2013/09 / N / HS3 / 02108). When a piece of information comes from more informal conversations and observations conducted in Kathak schools, it is referred to as fieldwork notes.

Kathak is usually described as a north-Indian classical dance form. Since this dance is believed to have been transmitted among certain clans of hereditary performers in a system patterned on *guru-kul* and *guru-śiṣya paramparā*,¹ the particular styles of Kathak evolved from these lineages are termed as *gharānās* (from the Hindi word *ghar* = home). In reference to the leading centers of Kathak development, three main *gharānās*, understood as “styles” or “schools”, are distinguished: Lucknow *gharānā*, Jaipur *gharānā* and Benares *gharānā*.

Along with the collapse of the former structures of patronage in the first half of the 20th century, the role of these cities as cultural centers of Kathak decreased. In the 1950s many prominent, hereditary artists shifted to New Delhi, turning the newly founded, national auditoria in the capital into mainstream Kathak stages, where all the *gharānās* were exposed and started to intermingle. Since then government scholarships have attracted many non-hereditary students, who came to Delhi from various corners of India, in order to study Kathak under the tutelage of *gharānēdār gurus* (hereditary dance masters). Graduating with a diploma from the most prestigious academies, such as Delhi Kathak Kendra,² has become a new path of winning recognition in the Kathak world. The Indian state has become a principal sponsor of Kathak artists, providing them with regular teaching

¹ Most of the Indian terms used in this paper are Hindi words. Some of them have Sanskrit origin, and some terms are used both in Hindi and Urdu. When a term derives from Urdu and the transcription follows Urdu spelling, the language of origin is indicated in brackets (Ur.). Titles of Sanskrit texts are given in their original form.

² Kathak Kendra (National Institute of Kathak Dance) in New Delhi is a leading Kathak dance institution in India, established in 1964 as a constituent unit of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, under Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. This school is “dedicated to promoting the practice, development and awareness of Kathak Dance as an artistic skill, as well as a component of the rich classical heritage of the nation” (see <https://kathakkendra.org/about.html>). It groups together prominent hereditary and non-hereditary Kathak *gurus* and talented dance students from all over India, as well as foreigners.

positions in dance academies and offering vacancies in the “Repertory Wing” of the schools. The new Indian elites have also supported numerous private institutions in Delhi, such as Bharatiya Kala Kendra. Minor schools and individual artists have also been able to apply for grants offered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), or Ministry of Culture. Since the network of acquaintances has been often decisive in this process, staying closer to the center of power increases the chances of receiving sponsorship.

The institutionalized training under hereditary masters has led to the interference of the former traditions with modern tendencies to standardize the art in reference to Sanskrit aesthetics. This initiative seems to have been crucial in the project of refashioning Kathak as one of the “styles” of classical, (pan-)Indian dance.³ Meanwhile, the former cultural centers have shrunk with both the accomplished teachers, artists, as well as funding opportunities. In spite of the foundation and activity of the state dance academies, such as Kathak Kendra branches in Lucknow and Jaipur, the legacy of Kathak in these locations has been neglected in recent decades. The cultural map of Kathak seems to have become centered around Delhi. The proximity to the political structures reinforced the process of Kathak nationalization, which—to some extent—further impacted the dance praxis in the more provincial locations, as well as in new cosmopolitan centers of dance development.

³ A similar process in the history of Bharatanatyam has been demonstrated by Coorlawala and termed Sanskritization of the dance (Coorlawala 2004). Srinivas, the author of this term, first introduced in sociology, defines Sanskritization as “the process by which a “low” Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and a way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently “twice-born” caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community” (Srinivas 1966: 6). In terms of dance, Coorlawala has redefined Sanskritization as a legitimizing process of imposition of Sanskrit aesthetics onto a modern dance form, or interconnecting the two, in order to “upgrade” the dance status to the level of “classical” art (Coorlawala 2004: 53).

The contemporary Kathak dance scene seems to be dominated by exponents of Lucknow *gharānā* (prevalent on Delhi stages), with Birju Maharaj as a leading master, and—to a lesser extent—Jaipur *gharānā*. Few artists cultivate Banares *gharānā*, which is regarded to be an offshoot of the Jaipur school, since its legendary founder—Janki Prasad—came from Bikaner (Kothari 1989: 59). There are some initiatives to promote Raigarh *gharānā* of Kathak, mainly in Khairagarh. Some efforts are also made by individuals to revive Kathak in Pakistan, since Lahore used to be one of the former centers of the dance patronage. While the revivalist activities in former cultural centers are not very successful, this dance has flourished abroad,⁴ driven by global fashions and interests to watch and practice South Asian exotica.

An exported Kathak tradition has been subjected to various modifications, in response to the tastes of Western spectators. When the tradition transformed abroad is brought back to India, it would also impact the original practices. The various Indian cities, in which Kathak is cultivated today, differ in the attachment to the regional culture, susceptibility to conservatism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, linked to their economic situation. These factors shape divergent approaches toward the arts in the various corners of India. The paper intends to examine interrelations between these factors in the cultural practice of Kathak dance, exemplified by a case study of Lucknow artists.

Remapping the centers and peripheries

Kathak is sometimes identified as part of *Gaṅgā-Jamunī tahrīb* (Ur. “culture of Ganges and Yamuna [river basins]”)—a term

⁴ Kathak has been disseminated particularly in the South Asian diaspora in Great Britain and United States since the 1970s, due to international tours of famous Kathak artists from India, as well as promotion of performances and teaching Kathak by the ICCR. In recent years it has also gained popularity in Russia, France, Italy, Germany, Canada, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and many other countries—both among migrants from South Asia, as well as among other foreigners.

signifying not only geographical coverage, but also the composite culture, founded on the ground of Hindu-Muslim harmony, that is believed to have permeated the area of the present Uttar Pradesh over the ages (Ikramullah 2013). 19th century Lucknow is particularly considered a hub of this unique, syncretic culture. Avadh nawabs have been recorded in history for their passion and support for performing arts, including Kathak. Wajid Ali Shah in particular is credited for promoting Kathak, due to his lavish patronage given to many dancers and musicians. Most dance historians tend to emphasize his active role in refining dance, pointing to poems, dramas and art treatises ascribed to him, as well as to the legend, that he himself danced the role of Kṛṣṇa in a sort of opera—ballets, called *rahas*, staged at his court. Being a Muslim ruler, he enjoyed stories from Hindu mythology. His court provided a shelter for both Muslim and Hindu artists and a space for cultural exchange (Kothari 1989: 10, 24–25). Kathak, recognized as a symbol of this harmonious synthesis, has been entangled into various discourses, glorifying the “golden eras” of Indo-Muslim coexistence, especially the Mughals’ reign.⁵ If we trace the biographies of prominent Indian dancers and musicians in the colonial period, we can assume that Hindustani dance and music was a fluid space, where religious identities had been often transcended.⁶ Hindu *kathakas* would have presented their Vaishnava repertoire in front of nawabs, meanwhile Muslim courtesans were performing at various Hindu celebrations and singing *kṛṣṇa-līlā* songs. The aesthetics of Kathak is considered a product of this Indo-Islamic milieu. This view was reinforced especially under Nehru’s leadership, who opted for India’s “unity in diversity” and religious pluralism.

⁵ The artistic expression of this idea can be found in “historical” productions staged by leading Kathak academies in Delhi, such as *Taj-ki-kahani* (“The Story of Taj”), *Shan-e-Mughal* (“Mughals’ Glory”), *Shan-e-Avadh* (“Splendor of Oudh”), *Shahi mehfil* (“Mehfil of the Shah”), *Darbar-e-Salami* (“Salutation to the Court”), or *Indra Sabha* (“Gathering at Indra’s Court”).

⁶ See, for instance, biographies of Gauhar Jaan (Sampath 2010), or Malka Pukhraj (Pukhraj 2002).

The regional richness is manifested in the variety of forms of classical Indian dance, termed as “styles”. All the classical dances are believed to be founded on the common ground of Sanskrit aesthetics, particularly the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Kathak is commonly described as elegant, graceful, rhythmical and relatively naturalistic dance, associated with Vaishnavism, but also impacted by Islam. The two leading Kathak *gharānās* seem to represent the modalities of the showcased national features: Rajputs’ valor and Mughal’s finesse. Artists and critics tend to talk about *nazākat* (Ur. “delicacy”) and *khūbsūrātī* (Ur. “beauty”) as essential characteristic of Kathak, emerging from Lakhnavi culture and Muslim court etiquette (Kothari 1989: 26, Narayan 1998: 127).

Alternatively, Kathak is associated with the Braj region, since the traditional repertoire is dominated by *kṛṣṇa-līlā* themes (set in Braj *bhūmi*) and often illustrated through the songs, or melo-recitations in Braj *bhāṣā*. Because of its association with Kṛṣṇa theme, some artists, such as Shambhu Maharaj, and theorists opt for the term *naṭvarī nṛtya*⁷ (“the dance of / on Naṭvar”) as the proper name for the dance (Sinh 1984: 4–5). The term, however, bears strong connotations with Hindu culture and may reveal a certain political agenda behind it. On the other hand, the term “Kathak” has been criticized for equating the dance with the caste of *kathaks*, disseminated mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The opponents of this name claim that it narrows the original community of Kathak performers to just one group of story-tellers, excluding other hereditary performing communities that could contribute to the origin of Kathak.⁸

⁷ Naṭvar is one of the epithets of Kṛṣṇa.

⁸ Walker, in her critical history of Kathak, has demonstrated that the hereditary groups of performers exposing dance technique from which modern Kathak could be derived were heterogeneous, including *bhāmṛ*, *mīrāsī*, *kalāvant*, *bhagat*, *naqqāl*, *dhārḥī* and *ḍholī* (Walker 2014: 75–88). She has also highlighted the fact that the artists employed by nawab Wajid Ali Shah’s courts were referred as Bhagats, and there is neither mention of the *kathaks*, nor the names of Birju Maharaj’s ancestors in the nawab’s books (Walker 2014: 132–3).

Visual resources, such as 19th century photographs, or paintings, illustrating north-Indian dance traditions, termed by British as *nautch*, indicate many other classes of performers, as well as locations in which the dance resembling Kathak was in vogue (Neville 1996, Walker 2014: 51–60).⁹ Some accounts and biographies of artists who learned Kathak reveal that the performers used to travel to various, distant locations where there was a demand for their art.¹⁰ In the 19th century and early 20th century, Kathak was a popular court or salons' entertainment in cities such as Rampur, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Jammu, or Lahore. Thus, we can conclude, that apart from the three aforementioned cities, a tradition prototypical to this classical dance flourished in the vast area of north India and today's Pakistan. But, in consequence of social and political changes, Kathak has almost disappeared from Pakistan.

In postcolonial India, recalling the presupposed, former Indo-Islamic harmony of Lucknow, Kathak could have played a supportive role in propagating secular ideologies. The dance has been subjected to other metamorphosis (like Hinduization or Sanskritization), accompanied by various nationalist discourses (Chakravorty 2008). The analysis of the repertoire staged by leading national artists indicates that, especially since the 1990s, Islamic elements in Kathak have started to be erased from the stage and replaced by Hindu equivalents, pointing to the increasing impact of Hindu nationalism (*ibidem*). An analogous tendency in the stage presentation, selection of repertoire, teaching, theory writing and standardizing procedures (in accordance with Sanskrit aesthetics) can be currently observed in state-sponsored Kathak dance institutions, such as Kathak Kendra in New Delhi.¹¹

⁹ See also <http://www.oldindianphotos.in/2009/11/indian-nutch-dancing-girls-various.html>.

¹⁰ Especially the courtesans (Ur. *tawā'ifs*). One of the etymologies of the term is that *tawā'ifs* were very mobile and used to travel from place to place, where there was a demand for their art (Saleem Kidwai, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 10, 2015).

¹¹ For instance, Urdu nomenclature and Muslim elements of repertoire are avoided, Sanskrit and Sanskritized vocabulary is promoted in the class,

In search of the springs: Significance of *gharānās*

Although the predominant discourse, produced by Indian dance historians and many artists, traces the origin of Kathak back around two thousand years, referring to the mythological communities of story-tellers, mentioned in Sanskrit epics (*kathakas* in *Mahābhārata*, or *kuśīlavas* in *Rāmāyaṇa*), hereditary dancers seem to emphasize the role of their own clan in the evolution of the dance. When I asked Pt. Birju Maharaj about the origin of Kathak, he referred it to the art of his own ancestors, seven generations back, who lived in Kichikila village near Allahabad (Birju Maharaj, pers. comm., New Delhi, February 18, 2015). At that time, there was a big community (989 houses) of dancers and musicians called *kathakārs*, who wandered around, singing songs for Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. They performed in temples and in the houses of rich landowners (*zamīndārs*), usually at ritual functions, such as marriage, piercing of ears (*karṇ chedan*), first shaving of head (*muṇḍan*), or religious festivals (Holi, Divali, Daśahra). Their art of story-telling included some simple dance, accentuated by the sounds of anklet bells (*ibidem*).

When the situation became unstable, some of the families moved to other places: Kashi, Ayodhya, Revan, Mahua, Haridvarpur, Lucknow. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah called sixty members of Birju Maharaj's family to perform in the Lucknow court. In the Muslim court his ancestors started to perform to Urdu poetry and developed more rhythmical sections of dance, along with greater speed.

In the interview, Birju Maharaj also recollected that drumming, singing and dance had always resounded in his house. Women would have learnt some songs and movements from observation, but only men could undergo a proper training and perform. Because of purdah customs, ladies could not travel. They were obliged to cover themselves and only take care of children and the household. Their

stages and training spaces are marked with symbols of Hindu religiosity (fieldwork notes).

shyness, as a desirable female virtue, is still manifested in *ghūṇghaṭ* (lit. Hindi “veil”)—a typical Kathak sequence including the gesture of covering the face with a veil. “There is more beauty if you uncover it from behind a curtain”—explains “Maharaj-ji” (*ibidem*). His daughter, Mamta Maharaj, was the first woman in the clan to appear on stage. Before, the only dancing girls were the courtesans—*tawā’ifs*. Some of them learned from his father and uncles. They presented good standards of Kathak, as well as were skilled vocalists. They were also invited to perform at various functions, such as marriages or birthdays. During the gatherings (*baithak*), organized at special occasions, *tawā’ifs* usually performed first. After their shows, comics called *bhāṇḍ*s used to entertain guests. The *kathakārs*’ performance of “classical Kathak” and *thumrī*¹² songs closed the soirees in the early morning (*ibidem*).

Shifting emphasis on the importance on *gharānās* has led to the legitimization of hereditary male performers as the only rightful transmitters of the tradition over recent generations. Simultaneously, female hereditary performers (courtesans), learning the dance from these masters, have been denied this role. As was already mentioned, most of the dancing girls were courtesans or prostitutes, and many dance historians found this fact uncomfortable. To sanitize history, various opinions have been disseminated, reshaping the dominant view of the Kathak past. Dancers either claim that *tawā’ifs* never danced Kathak, but they performed *mujra*, or its “corrupted” version—incorporating only some Kathak movements with more vulgar body language. Some recognize *tawā’ifs* as Kathak performers but underline many differences between them and *gharānedār gurus*, because of their profession and religious affiliation (fieldwork notes).

¹² *Thumrī*—a type of short, lyrical composition, designed for interpretative, vocal elaboration, also accompanied by Kathak dance and *abhinay* mainly based on an erotic motive, depicting love of a heroine for a hero (often longing of a shepherdess, a *gopī*, for Kṛṣṇa). It was popularized in the 19th century Lucknow court and salons by courtesans. Nowadays it is regarded as a semi-classical, light genre of Hindustani music.

People living in Lucknow who remember performances of *tawā'ifs* are most inclined to attest that these women were accomplished vocalists and Kathak dancers, educated by prominent *ustāds*.¹³ Since they were rich and independent, they could pay the best money for the classes. Because of their skills and high social status, it was no shame to watch their shows. The practice stopped mainly in consequence of the abolition of the *zamīndārī* system (Saleem Kidwai, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 10, 2015; Veena Sinh, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 9, 2015), however, in the 1970s it was still possible to see their art in *koṭhās*¹⁴ (Ashish Khokar, pers. comm., Chennai, January 2014). Having lost the main class of their patrons, *tawā'ifs* could either refashion themselves as vocalists employed in the film industry, or in All India Radio, get married and turn into housewives, or become prostitutes (Chakravorty 2008, Saleem Kidwai, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 10, 2015). Nowadays, it is hard to meet a real *tawā'if* because of a social stigma imposed on them in consequence of the anti-nautch movement.¹⁵ The majority of them try to hide their social background and do not want to talk about the past. Their daughters, who have found a respectable place in society, visit them after dark, so that no one can discover their ancestry (Saleem Kidwai, pers. comm., Lucknow,

¹³ *Ustād*—an honorific title, used in Muslim world, meaning “a master”, to refer to prominent artists and teachers of music.

¹⁴ *Koṭhā*—a salon of courtesans, where they lived, presented their artistic skills and were visited by clients.

¹⁵ The anti-nautch movement was a campaign, launched by British colonialists and missionaries in British India at the end of the 19th century against *nautch*—hereditary female dancers: *devadāsīs* (temple danseuses) in southern India and *tawā'ifs* in the north. It aimed at abolishing the dedication of young girls for temple service (which included dance and sexual services, regarded as prostitution), as well as abolishing the institution of *tawā'ifs* and their dance performances called “*nautch parties*”, presented in the courts, salons, cantonments and during private and religious gatherings. It resulted in social ostracism of hereditary female dancers and their arts in the first half of the 20th century.

April 10, 2015). This way, waves of nationalism swept off this distinctive landmark of Lucknow culture.

Hindu-Muslim dichotomy in the creation of Kathak *gharānās*

In popular images, *tawā'ifs*, assigned to Islamic culture, triggered Kathak's secularization. In the light of discourses produced in the course of the anti-nautch campaign, the courtesans "polluted" or "corrupted" the real Kathak (Khokar 1979: 96, Walker 2014: 557). Although Rajput culture is not free from Muslim influences, in popular opinion disseminated among the present-day community of Kathak performers, Jaipur *gharānā* is a "purely Hindu" branch of this dance. It is believed that it was transmitted solely through male story-tellers, who could freely express their piousness in front of Hindu patrons and rulers (contrary to Lucknow artists). Some temples in Rajasthan (such as the Govind Deo temple in Jaipur) are indicated as Kathak venues. Banares *gharānā* is also described as a religious dance, overflowing with the taste of *bhakti* (Gupta 2004: 36–37).

A shift of the dance to Muslim courts is considered as the main factor of its secularization and decreasing devotional importance (Kothari 1989: 2). In popular views, Muslim rulers were not interested in mythological stories and would rather appreciate technical virtuosity of the dance. Therefore, artists would have elaborated complex footwork, rhythmical improvisations, multiple pirouettes and geometrical poses to satisfy the expectations of new patrons. Some sources identify these technical aspects of Kathak as Persian imports. The origin and stylistic features of *gharānās* are often contextualized against the backdrop of this interaction (Narayan 1998: 127–130).

There are, however, numerous incongruities between this predominant historical vision and characterization of Kathak schools. Jaipur style is considered as more vigorous, fast and focused on technical excellence: its exponents are praised for their speed, agility, or ability to render a series of multiple fast turns (*cakkars*). Mythological stories are provided mainly through the medium of *kavitts* and *tukrās*—short compositions consisting of semi-abstract, rhythmical

melo-recitation. Watching various dance shows and classes, it seems that technical precision is even of greater importance for Jaipur *gurus* than a narrative and emotional expression (*abhinay*).

In comparison, Lucknow masters pay more attention to the depiction of feelings (*bhāv*) through gestures and mime. The dance is often slower, subtle, sensual, limited in demonstration of footwork and focused on presenting a story (usually from Kṛṣṇa mythology). The dancers primarily elaborate lyrical compositions (*thumrī* and *gaza*l), improvising on their content and filling their performance with emotional depth. This fact collides with the argument that the emphasis on technique, rhythm and abstract dance results from Muslim patronage. Some artists even indicate that the tendency to develop complicated footwork (*tatkār*), pirouettes and increase of speed in Lucknow *gharānā* is the result of the influence of Jaipur style from the time when the two schools were brought into close proximity. Moreover, the Hindu theme of *kṛṣṇa-līlā* has been vividly explored by Lucknow dancers. Muslim audiences would have perhaps interpreted the Hindu content from the secular perspective. According to Lucknow artists, the performances of Kathak dancers belonging to their school have been also given in temples and shrines in the vast area of today's Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, on Hindu and Muslim celebrations, maintaining its religious function.¹⁶ Due to their liminal status, *tawā'ifs* (regardless of their faith) were also invited for celebrations of weddings and other rites of passage, both Islamic and Hindu, in order to bring auspiciousness (Saleem Kidwai, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 10, 2015).

Since Kathak schools started offering scholarships and attracting students from other parts of the country, the relation between the particular regional identity of performers and their *gurus* was gradually losing importance. Even if the hereditary dancers preferred to stick to the aesthetics of their own clan, their disciples often engaged

¹⁶ For example, the annual Sankat Mochan festival, held in Varanasi, hosts great music and dance stars, including Muslim musicians and Kathak exponents of Lucknow style.

in the training in both the styles. Many artists of the younger generation started to enrich their own technique with the elements drawn from other schools and individual styles of other *gurus*. Whereas senior dancers, especially from hereditary communities, criticize this practice, opting for maintaining the “purity” of *gharānās*, many of their disciples regard it as a good method to enhance Kathak technique (fieldwork notes).

Circulation of knowledge and practices

Senior *gurus*, whom I have interviewed, claim that in the beginning of the 1950s there were a lot of differences not only between the *gharānās*, but also between the individual styles of masters belonging to the same clan. There was, however, lesser rivalry between the separate schools. The postcolonial institutionalization triggered homogenization of the various Kathak schools (Chakravorty 2008). Nowadays, there are arguments about the origin of certain elements, for example, graceful movement of the neck. Lucknow exponents claim that Jaipur masters have recently borrowed the movement from them, as previously the style of the latter artists lacked the softness of head, neck, or hand movements and the subtleties of *abhinay*. Durga Lal, being the exception among the Jaipur *gharānā* exponents, used to dance softly. Thus, he is believed to have watched the Lucknow *gurus* and learned the subtle movements through observing them (Arjun Mishra, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 11, 2015). On the other hand, Shambhu Maharaj style is described as more sharp in comparison to his brother’s—Lacchu Maharaj—soft movements. Birju Maharaj studied with both uncles and incorporated more of Lacchu’s style (*ibidem*).

There is also an argument between Lucknow and Jaipur style exponents around the question of which *gharānā* is the oldest one. Jaipur *gurus* claim that the names of the first Lucknawi *kathaks* (Arguji, Kharguji) are Rajasthani, so they must have come from Rajasthan (especially the Churu district near Bikaner) (Harish Gangani, pers. comm., Vadodara, February 9, 2014). On the other hand, some Lakhnawi artists say that exponents of other schools

(Sitara Devi, Alaknanda Devi, Sunder Prasad, Ishvari Prasad) were sent to Lucknow *gurus* to master their dance (Arjun Mishra, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 6, 2015). In fact, it seems that the region was not a decisive criteria in the process of absorbing knowledge of the particular Kathak *gharānā*.

Until the 20th century, *gharānās* were associated rather with the individual dance styles of prominent *gurus*. It is not exactly known when it was decided to term Kathak schools after the name of the cities. Sunil Kothari points out that around 1895 there was a meeting on which it was decided that the regions would become the main criteria of classification (Kothari 1989: 50–51). Thus, the various styles of Rajasthani *gurus*, belonging to Sanwaldasji *gharānā* were renamed as Jaipur *gharānā*, while the style of Birju Maharaj's clan started to be termed as Lucknow *gharānā*. The Banares branch is considered to have been developed by two clans. The particular family of hereditary artists seems to be a decisive condition in recognizing the existence of a particular *gharānā*. This locates the hereditary *gurus* in an extraordinary position in the hierarchy of the Kathak world. The Raigarh court maintained many Kathak dancers (representing all the three schools), due to the support of raja Chakkradhar Sinh, but the lack of a particular clan that transmitted the dance knowledge through generations in this place has situated it in a subordinate position. Similarly, nowadays, Delhi, being the leading Kathak stage, is not referred as a separate *gharānā*, since the various styles are cultivated there as separate traditions (though many changes have been introduced into them).

Nowadays, Kathak is practiced in the majority of Indian states, primarily in big cities, including Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Hyderabad, or Bangalore. There are also Kathak schools outside India, especially in the centers of the South Asian diaspora in Great Britain and the United States.¹⁷ Often, the specific geographical location imprint the tradition, leading to a plethora of Kathak styles, so different from

¹⁷ The database of Kathak artists and institutions is found on: www.narthaki.com/kathak/ktkdivi.htm.

the three main *gharānās* that their promoters propose new terms for these variants, such as “Ahmedabad *gharānā*”, promoted by Kumudini Lakhia (Kumudini Lakhia, pers. comm., Ahmedabad, February 20, 2014) or “California *gharānā*” evolved by Chitres Das (Chakravorty 2006: 127) —both emanating from the Lucknow lineage. It is remarkable that the individual styles of these *gurus* migrate to other locations, influencing their performers (due to dance workshops and artistic collaboration). This phenomenon can be particularly observed in Kolkata, in which the Kathak community seems to be most receptive to a variety of dance styles and fertile in the field of dance experimentalism.¹⁸

Kathak dancers usually declare allegiance to one of the three recognized schools. Some artists, however, share a more skeptical approach to the relevance of the *gharānās* in contemporary practice:

I don't believe in *gharānās*. Birju Maharaj and his family, his father and uncles, lived in Lucknow. That is where the Lucknow school of Kathak comes from. But if I call myself that I belong to Lucknow *gharānā*, my first question that I have to ask myself is: “Have you lived in Lucknow?” I visited Lucknow many times, but I don't think I'm carrying the same emotions and expressions as people in Lucknow are carrying. (Anurekha Ghosh, pers. comm., Kolkata, March 13, 2015)

It seems that today the geographical location significantly determines the art and praxis of the dance. Shambhu Maharaj often expressed his sadness about leaving Lucknow in order to teach students from a totally different cultural background (Khokar 2004: 32). The atmosphere of *mahfils*—dance and musical soirees—was impossible to recreate in postcolonial Delhi, rapidly being transformed into a modern capital of an independent nation-state. When Lucknow *gharānedār gurus* shifted to Delhi, their dance underwent a considerable transformation. Shambhu Maharaj did not favor the new fashions and deliberately continued to teach only *kṛṣṇa-līlā* themes.¹⁹

¹⁸ Fieldwork observation, Kolkata, March 2015. See the case study of the transcultural style of Kathak evolved by Chitresh Das and its impact on Kolkata dancers conducted by Dalidowicz (Dalidowicz 2010).

¹⁹ This, in turn, provoked resistance on the part of some of his disciples, who were bored with the constant repetition of the same theme. Even his

I have no patience for all this modern stuff. I accept there was some kind of dance dramas in Wajid Ali Shah's Court, but were they Kathak? You must understand Kathak is a very personal art, an intimate art, and it is not tailored for collective participation or projection. I refuse to recognize mummerly of this variety... The Kathak I dance is brewed in a heady atmosphere of poetry, women and wine, and that milieu is lost. (Khokar 2012: 35)

Together with the spatial factors, the historical changes were equally significant. An analysis of archival recordings reveals a big difference between the Kathak danced in the 1950s by Shambhu Maharaj and the dance ballets choreographed by his nephew two to three decades later.²⁰ Heading Kathak Kendra for many years, Birju Maharaj has greatly refined the technique of Kathak and broaden its thematic scope. He has popularized group choreographies, producing several dance dramas on historical, mythological, legendary, as well as abstract themes (Khokar 1998, Sen 2013). Apart from the Hindu narratives and traditional songs (*thumrī*, *dādrā*, *bhajan*), he has choreographed several dance ballets manifesting the splendor of Moghul courts. He has also adapted Western plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, in the Kathak technique. These innovations helped to satisfy the tastes of modern Delhi audiences, as well as popularize the dance abroad. Since they were introduced by the hereditary *guru*, they could be considered a sign of development and not breaking the rules of tradition.

Winds of modernity: Classicization of Kathak in dance academies

Social relocation of Kathak from courts, salons and private gatherings to national auditoria has induced a considerable shift in its aesthetics. In order to regain social respectability in the eyes of new patrons, the past of Kathak required 'purification'. This tendency stems from the Indian middle-class desires to appropriate the popular as "the timeless truth of the national culture, uncontaminated by colonial reason,

nephew understood the need to enrich the repertoire and rearrange the format of presentation, matching it to the vast space of new theaters and concert halls.

²⁰ Archival research: Sangeet Natak Akademi, February–April 2015, New York Public Library, February 2016.

(...) in a sanitized form, carefully erased of all marks of vulgarity, coarseness, localism, and sectarian identity” (Chatterjee 1993: 73). In the context of Kathak, it signified primarily erasure of seductive aspects of the dance, resulting from its connection to the courtesans’ culture. The discussions around the modern shape of Kathak also concerned battling the marks of feudalism and replacing them with the postulate of democratization.²¹

In this process, Sanskrit literature has become instrumental for enriching the repertoire with new stories (taken from epics, Purāṇas, Sanskrit dramas), facilitating the dance Hinduization and providing it with the aura of sanctity and sophistication. This practice was launched in the 1930s by a Brahmin woman Madame Menaka, regarded as a pioneer of Kathak revival. She modernized the tradition to the form of dance ballets with librettos based on Sanskrit dramas and stories from Hindu mythology. The tendency became particularly strong in dance academies and departments of Indian universities founded in the post-independence period. Many Kathak choreographers have turned to *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Gītāgovinda* and works of Kālidāsa in search for inspiration.

When the Kathak teachers from hereditary families were brought to newly established institutions in Delhi, they had to readapt the system of training to the middle class adepts and their daily routines. Before they used to transmit the knowledge orally, so there was an urge to “rediscover” a textual source of the tradition, which would “stabilize” the knowledge. Hence, dance theorists, together with artists, started tracing the interlinks between Kathak and Sanskrit dance literature. Print media were crucial in disseminating the outcomes of this pursuit. Numerous Kathak manuals have included an overview of Kathak technique described in terms of aesthetical concepts and nomenclature from *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinayadarpaṇa*. It was an innovative practice, aimed at homogenization of the technique, which would facilitate

²¹ Analysis of press clippings, accessible in Sangeet Natak Academy, New Delhi 2015.

institutional training and mobility of students in the new circumstances. In the previous system of education, hereditary teachers used to do and term dance movements in various ways, so it was difficult for students to shift between various schools and styles. It was also problematic for dance theorists and syllabus designers to reach consensus on the basis of the divergent views and practices of individual *gurus*.

The Jaipur style exponents of the Gangani lineage, who I have interviewed, confessed that the tradition between the generations had been transmitted solely orally. Similarly, Arjun Mishra, or Chetna Jalan, who studied Kathak under the tutelage of Lucknow *guru*, Pt. Ram Narayan Mishra in Kolkata, also said that the *guru* made no use of any text in praxis (Chetna Jalan, pers. comm., Kolkata, March 9, 2015; Arjun Mishra, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 11, 2015). Even the young generation of artists affirm the absence of texts in their own Kathak training:

I refer to knowledge I have learned from old *gurus*. Old teachers never referred to books, they referred to their body and they used to teach us according to our bodies, so it was all a practical understanding and along with that a theoretical knowledge which they used to give us. For that we would never refer to books. (Mitul Sengupta, pers. comm., Kolkata, March 9, 2015)

The state institutions insist on developing dance theory, following the scientific approach to Hindustani music, its re-standardization and notation launched by Bhatkhande (Bakhle 2005). In consequence, nearly all Kathak institutes have developed educational programs consisting of theory classes. According to the present Director of Kathak Kendra, the syllabus and examination system has in fact limited the authority of the *gharānedār gurus* in teaching (Sushmita Ghosh, pers. comm., New Delhi, April 17, 2015). The advisory committee of Kathak Kendra, who endeavor to standardize Kathak, seem to favor Sanskritic nomenclature and concepts. But, there is still much to be done to apply the theory into practical knowledge and systematize Kathak (*ibidem*).

The authority and attachment to traditions of hereditary *gurus* seem to provide a line of resistance to a successful conventionalization of Kathak, based on adopting Sanskrit theories. These tendencies have

been mainly imposed by non-hereditary elites, or bureaucrats, acting in order to refashion Kathak as a national, classical dance. As an alternative to the Sanskritized nomenclature, Birju Maharaj elaborated his own overview of the technique, called *Āṅg Kāvya* (2002), distanced from the shastric framework. His contemporary performances seem to pertain to the familiar Lakhnavi traditions, obsoleted by other exponents of Lucknow style in Delhi, including his descendants. He continues to practise seated *abhinay*, while singing and playing. He is more focused on presenting emotional expression and still pays more attention to every little movement of eyes, or fingers, rather than elaboration of fast turns and footwork (see Picture no 1). His *abhinay* always meets with great applause, however, in the opinion of many dancers and dance critics, there are not many performers that are compared to him in this matter and heralded as his real successors (fieldwork notes, New Delhi 2015). This traditional art of intimate gestures seems to be a thing of the past (Uma Sharma, pers. comm., New Delhi, March 27, 2014; Sunayana Hazarilal, pers. comm., Mumbai, February 14, 2014).

Transplanting *guru-śiṣya paramparā* into modern dance practice

Gharānās, *gharānedār gurus* and *guru-śiṣya paramparā* have played an important role in the (re)invention of Kathak as a classical Indian dance. Nowadays, many teachers insist that they are continuing the training according to the traditional system of *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, even in dance institutes. The previous system, however, described by hereditary dancers in interviews, varies in many aspects from contemporary training. To bridge the gap between this traditional pattern of education and modernized spaces of its implementation, this concept is variously reinterpreted to justify these claims.

Among hereditary communities, dance training usually meant a transmission of knowledge from father to son, or from uncle to nephew (*guru-kul*). Alternatively, a disciple was sent to live in a house of his *guru* for the time of training and he paid complete obedience to him in exchange for knowledge. A disciple was expected to become

a perfect copy of his master and faithfully carry on his dance style. The former system implied complete dedication of a disciple (*śiṣya*) to the education. The *guru* was perceived as an unquestioned authority and a spiritual guide. The aspect of devotion to the master and training has been often underlined by my respondents, including the students in modern dance academies. But as far as social practice goes, a lot must have been changed as the middle classes, impacted by modern ideas and cosmopolitan lifestyles, have entered and dominated the dance field.

The traditional system could be still maintained within the hereditary families, but many aspects had to be modified in modern dance institutions, where one *guru* has many disciples and often a student has many teachers. Moreover, classes have exact timing and are just one of the many daily activities of the students. To highlight the basic differences, I refer to the account of *guru* Arjun Mishra, recollecting his own training under the tutelage of his uncle, Pt. Ram Narayan Mishra.²²

Arjun Mishra was born in 1958, in a family of musicians from Benares (of the *kathak* caste, colligated with Birju Maharaj's family), who claim to have continued the profession for thirteen generations. At the age of six, he left home to undergo dance training in Kolkata. The education was initiated by a ritual of *gaṇḍā-bandhan*—tying a string by the *guru*. Every day, he was woken up at 3 a.m. by his teacher. The first portion of knowledge was given from 4 to 6 a.m. At 6 o'clock, there was a ten-minute break for breakfast and tea. Another break was at 9 a.m. for lunch and the classes lasted till 1 p.m. Subsequently, till 4 p.m. he practiced on his own. Next, the *guru* used to give him two rupees to go out and grab some food. Around 6 p.m. the classes restarted. He had to show what he had practised in the afternoon. If he made a mistake, or did not know something, he was scorned and beaten by his *guru*. Around 11 p.m. both of them went to sleep. He used to sleep

²² The account is based on a series of interviews with Arjun Mishra, carried out in his Kathak Academy in Lucknow in April 2015, and observations conducted in Lucknow, Delhi, and Vadodara in 2014–2015.

near his *guru*. If the teacher recited a *bol*²³ while sleeping, this very *bol* was practiced the next day.

From this short account, we can imagine that a dance disciple had not many other things to do apart from the training, so that he could completely concentrate on developing his talent. Ram Narayan Mishra also trained some *tawā'ifs*, who were skillful artists, like Madhuri Devi from Benares. As one of his relatives, Arjun Mishra was taught more difficult pieces than other students. He recalled that at the age of twelve he was watching solo dance performances lasting for several hours. The dance performances were going on from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. and there were only two dancers, performing for six hours each. Betel, hukka and wine were an integral part of these soirees.

After years of training, in the 1980s Arjun Mishra was selected to undergo a specialization course in Delhi Kathak Kendra and become a leading dancer in the Kathak ballet group directed by Birju Maharaj. Under the supervision of Birju Maharaj, he developed the quality of softness (Ur. *nazākat*) of hands and torso movements, which his technique had been lacking before. Afterwards, Arjun Mishra collaborated with Kumudini Lakhia, teaching in her Kadamb school. During his stay in Ahmedabad, he performed in several experimental productions of Lakhia. This collaboration must have contributed to his openness to innovations.

Since the Lakhnavi *gharānedār gurus* emigrated from Lucknow to other cities (Delhi, Mumbai), at the beginning of the 1990s there was a necessity to revive Kathak in its “hometown”. Arjun Mishra was designated for this task and appointed a senior (*variṣṭh*) *guru* at the Lucknow Kathak Kendra. It was, however, a real challenge, since there was no budget for programs. He became disappointed at the conditions of teaching in the institutions. Therefore, in 1998 he decided to open a private school in his own house, modelled on the system of

²³ *Bol*—spoken rhythmic pattern of a dance piece, often recited before its execution in the dance presentation of the particular Kathak composition, and also learned before the steps during a dance class.

training which he had received in his childhood. In his opinion, this is the only place where *guru-śiṣya paramparā* in Kathak is still alive. The *guru* died in 2015.

According to Arjun Mishra, the continuity of traditional training is impossible in modern institutions. Many alumni of Kathak institutes in Lucknow came to him for more knowledge. Hence, he shared the opinion of some dance critics that the best artists are produced under the tutelage of individual *gurus*, whereas dance institutes produce diploma holders but not real artists. His disciples have imparted his belief that the most important thing which shapes an artist is his/her dedication to dance, expressed in *riyāz* (Ur. “training”, “discipline”)—the daily discipline in a long-lasting dance education.

He insisted, that the real *guru* should have solely several students—only in this way can he carefully watch the progress of each of them. “It is better to produce five good soloists every year than many alumni who are not good”—he said. Therefore, he accepted only a few new students a year. Usually, he trained students for five years and then sent them to other masters, so that they could enrich their style, and he could welcome some new students in their place. His children were exceptions here—they had been learning Kathak only from him for many years. The essence of *guru-śiṣya paramparā* lies also in the attitude of a master. The *guru* did not want money for a class and did not care so much about time. He would teach poor, talented children for free. Even if a class was scheduled for one hour, it could last 3–4 hours, if necessary. He did not require *guru-sevā*²⁴ from his students, unless they wanted to perform it. Gestures like touching *guru*’s feet, or sitting lower than him, are non-verbal expressions of the traditional hierarchy, still commonly obeyed in most of the Kathak schools in India.

He considered understanding of music and rhythm as a crucial skill of a Kathak dancer and paid much attention to it. The classes were accompanied by a tabla player and included intense exercises of footwork. Disciples had to work on polishing their own technique after

²⁴ *Guru-sevā*—a tradition of servitude to a master in exchange for his teaching.

classes. Advanced students were given some tasks, like conveying a particular story on their own. Apart from the respect and discipline, he demanded intelligence and creative imagination from his students. If they revealed some gaps in their knowledge, he did not hide his anger. When he felt that the students were expecting him to serve knowledge “on a tray”, he would harshly underline the difference between the *guru* and the servant. Students seemed to be used to this behavior and sometimes reacted with laughter. In their opinion such a rigid and severe attitude is much more effective than the teaching methods in dance institutes.

His attachment to Lakhnavi traditions could be noticed in the standard performance of the Arjun Mishra Dance Company. Unlike most Delhi exponents, his disciples are performing typical Muslim elements, including *salāmī*,²⁵ elaborated *āmad*,²⁶ and *tarāna*.²⁷ There are portions of rhythmical variations, in a form of friendly competition between a solo dancer and a drummer (*jugal-bandhī*), which seems to be longer and more spontaneous in comparison with the predominant, current trends on the globalized Kathak stage. His son often exposes short compositions created by his father, or other *gurus* of Lucknow *gharānā*, attempting to recreate them as best as he can. The *guru* usually sits on the right side of the stage, singing or reciting *bol*, accompanied by a tabla and a sarangi player (see Picture no 2).²⁸

²⁵ *Salāmī*—Ur. “salutation”, welcoming sequence in Kathak performance, including gestures of greeting and respect.

²⁶ *Āmad*—Ur. lit. “arrival”, “advent”, usually performed in medium tempo, opening the sections of dance to rhythmical syllables (*bol*).

²⁷ *Tarāna*—Per. “song”, a type of composition in Kathak and Hindustani music in which certain words or syllables based on Persian or Arabic phonemes are sung, a short melody is repeated many times alternately with a contrasting melody. In a Kathak performance this piece is usually presented at the end of the show.

²⁸ Sarangi has been often replaced with a harmonium due to its association with performance by *tawā'if*.

Due to his advanced knowledge of Hindustani music, Arjun Mishra composed many items, based on traditional patterns. He also choreographed Kathak to *khayāl*, *dhrupad*, various Sanskrit and Hindi lyrics (for example, Harivansh Rai Bachchan's *Madhuśālā*). More experimental of his choreographies include combination of Kathak with Flamenco. He believed that artists shall "keep creating new things. If you keep on repeating the same compositions you will get bored. To me it is a *pūjā*".²⁹ This idea is carried forward by some of his prominent disciples, many of whom have become involved in innovative dance projects and regularly perform abroad.

National and global confluences

Among the disciples of Arjun Mishra, there are his son Anuj and two daughters, Kantika and Smriti. Some of the students moved to other cities, where they have become successful choreographers, developing their own, individual styles. For example, Nirupama and Rajendra have set up their own Abhinava Dance Studio in Bangalore, where they have created many productions, inspired by the legacy of Sanskrit literature³⁰ and the tradition of story-telling. The format of their Kathak presentation differs from the traditional one, consisting of various narrative items. There is little rhythmical improvisation, which in fact is often not understood and—in consequence—not appreciated by mass audiences. Usually, every piece is based on a story, reinterpreted in a creative way, enriched with colorful costumes, lights and innovative music. In their view, that is what swells emotions in every spectator and helps to create the impression of "wow" beyond "national"

²⁹ www.lucknowkathakacademy.com.

³⁰ In the opinion of Nirupama and Rajendra, south Indian dancers are more acquainted with Sanskrit language and literature than north Indians, significantly influenced by Muslim culture. Perhaps, the proximity of south Indian dance styles, such as Bharatanatyam, has also triggered deeper interest in serious research on Sanskrit dance literature on the part of Bangalore-based Kathak artists (launched by Kathak *guru* Maya Rao).

tastes (Nirupama and Rajendra, pers. comm., Bangalore, March 14, 2014). Indian literary heritage is used here as a rich reservoir of ideas and a base for the intricately elaborated plot, or subject of composition, representing the national identity. The representation is enriched through application of audio-visual effects, which makes the show more attractive to global audiences. In this way, the Sanskritized tradition becomes reframed within international strategies of stage presentation (see Picture no 3).

Another of his disciples, Delhi-based Manjari Chaturvedi, has elaborated innovative “sufi Kathak”—a dance including movements resembling meditative practices of whirling dervishes, set to the *qawwālī* songs based on Amir Khusro’s poems. Referring to Sufi mysticism matched the dominant trends of the capital dance stage, where exposing the sacral dimension of Kathak and transgressive religiosity is still well received (fieldwork notes, New Delhi, 2014–2015). A similar combination of Kathak and Sufi traditions has been presented by Rani Khanam, Rani Karna, Mamta Maharaj, Dipanwita, Astha Dixit.

A young dancer, Sanjukta Sinha, shifted to Ahmedabad to pursue her training under the guidance of Kumudini Lakhia (a pioneering artist in the field of experimentation). There, she became a teacher and a leading dancer in Kadamb, performing in Lakhia’s numerous innovative choreographies. She also collaborates with Kathak innovators from the Indian diaspora in the U.K. and France. Together with Anuj Mishra, she danced in the production “Fragments of a Dream” choreographed by Paris-based Rukmini Chatterjee. This was a choreographic collage of Kathak, contemporary ballet and Tanztheater, including quotations from the works of Pina Bausch, or musical compositions of Astor Piazzolla. Anuj has also danced in Anurekha Ghosh’s choreographies juxtaposing Kathak with flamenco, performed in collaboration with Spanish artists. Together with his sister, he also represented Kathak in the recent dance production of Carlos Saura’s “Flamenco India” (2015).

Nowadays, this kind of intercultural exchange and tours abroad are crucial in the careers of young Indian dancers. They provide them with funds, which enable them to develop their artistic activities.

Audiences in India usually expect to watch dance shows free of charge. Meanwhile, the dancers need to cover various expenses to give the performance: including the costs of costumes, musical accompaniment, hiring the venue, travel and accommodation expenses. Additionally, if a young artist wants to enrich his/her own skills, he/she also has to pay for workshops given by prominent *gurus*, who may charge a lot of money for a single class. Because of shortage of funds, dancers often take the role of their own managers, dealing with promotion and organization of the tours. In the unstable contemporary conditions, the artists must seek a compromise between preserving a tradition and the demands of global markets.

From my perspective it is very important that we go with present but don't forget our roots... We have to understand that change is the rule of world, and do some changes in traditional dances to go with the time and audience of today. It is very important to also work on present subjects. In the time of globalization it is good that Indian classical dancers are going out of India, interacting with another classical dances and music and creating new works, which are understandable to international audiences. (Anuj Mishra, email comm., March 23, 2014)

As an artist from a hereditary clan, Anuj Mishra will not exceed certain limitations of the tradition. For example, he cannot perform semi-classical Kathak³¹ (mixed with Bollywood dance/music). This, however, seems to be a product better sold than traditional Kathak outside India, so the other non-hereditary members of the company teach and perform this style during their tours abroad. Their dance shows also differ, according to the location and character of the venue.

³¹ In India this term is not in use. There is either Kathak, or Bollywood dance. Even many of the young generation of classical dancers in India seem to predominantly consider Bollywood dance as too sensual and refuse to demonstrate overt sexuality on stage. It reveals the remaining impact of the nationalist discourse on the community of Kathak dancers, their adherence to Indian notions of respectability, and, in some way, resistance to global dance fashions.

Basically, they keep up with classical Kathak technique, emphasizing some technical aspects, such as energetic jumps and long series of pirouettes, that generally meet with applause on global stages.

Besides, Anuj seems to select masculine portions of dance and embodying heroes rather than heroines. It corresponds with the increasing opinion among young dancers, that a male dancer should dance like a man—contradicting the traditional idea of transcending gender in the dance. The famous, old dance *gurus* were admired for their ability to enact young maidens, though they had grey hair and big moustaches (Jaikishan Maharaj, pers. comm., New Delhi, April 18, 2015, Jagdish Gangani, pers. comm., Vadodara, February 12, 2014). The new approach may be read as a symptom of a broader tendency toward individualization and self-expression in dance, fostered by influences of Western ideas on art. Simultaneously, Kathak is still viewed as an expression of Indianness and the dancers—as cultural ambassadors of India.

I think that whenever we perform the abstract piece of Kathak, in which we present the taals and the rhythmic patterns, compositions, rounds, footwork,—we present ourselves and not another personality... All the mythological stories teach us same thing; how we can respect our elders, what a guru stands for in our Indian cultural heritage, how our parents are important for us—we don't find these things in modern Indian dance these days, but these are very important basics for a child and for normal human being about own identity of a person in traditional dance... (Anuj Mishra, email comm., March 23, 2014)

All of Arjun Mishra's children have also taken exams in dance institutes (Bhatkhande Music University, Khairagarh University) in order to obtain a degree diploma in Kathak. They clarify that it helps in their further career, especially when a dancer wants to apply for a teaching position in one of the institutes. Due to involvement in institutionalized education, they also had to become acquainted with Sanskrit aesthetical concepts of dance. While studying for the exams, they noticed numerous discrepancies between *Nāṭyaśāstra* conventions and Kathak technique, absorbed from the practical training.

Nevertheless, their father considered the treatise as a source of their tradition and tried to explain to them the relevance of shastric concepts to Kathak aesthetics. In his view, the text indicates the “proper” way of performing gestures etc., even though Birju Maharaj does them differently. This attitude to the Sanskrit texts was probably an outcome of his involvement in teaching at the dance institutes. In the practical training, he rarely referred to shastric knowledge and nomenclature. Nevertheless, the network of relations to public institutions and hegemonic groups of the Kathak professionals’ community leads to absorbing their dominant art discourses and incorporating some of their elements into the corpus of the older tradition. Perhaps it is also a strategy to legitimize oneself in the world of classical dancers.

Lucknow: A shelter of traditional Kathak?

During my visits to Kathak schools in Lucknow, I was told that the majority of the local dance students are from poor families. In their hometown they learn traditional Lucknow repertoires in one of the dance institutes (Bhatkhande Music University, Kathak Kendra, or Rashtriya Kathak Sansthan). Kathak Kendra in Lucknow, a constituent of Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy, founded in 1972 from the initiative of the state government (Cultural Department of Uttar Pradesh), aims at producing performing artists, skilled both in solo and group choreographies. Students perform to mythological and historical subjects, as well as to *bhajans*, *thumrīs* and *gazals*. By comparison, *gazals* are not taught to Kathak Kendra students in Delhi (fieldwork notes, Kathak Kendra in Lucknow, April 2015).

The other important school of Kathak in Lucknow is Bhatkhande Music University, located in the Kaiser Bagh—a part of the remaining residency of Wajid Ali Shah. The education here is not very expensive, matching the capabilities of working class. Most of the teaching staff are non-hereditary artists and lecturers. The training combines dance practice, history and theory, as well as an elementary Sanskrit course. The former Head of the Dance Department, Dr. Puru Dhadhic, has promoted research in Sanskrit aesthetics. “Not every student appears

to be a good performer. In such cases, she/he can choose a career in teaching or research. If a student wants to master the technique, she/he can continue the education with an individual guru”—explains one of the staff member, Veena Singh (Veena Singh, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 9, 2015).

The objective of the practical dance classes is to train soloists, with strong technical skills, that would enable them to easily convey *abhinay* and improvise within the framework of tradition. Local teachers strongly oppose fusing Kathak with other forms.³² The university staff aims at educating “traditional artists”, who follow tradition and maintain its sacral aspect, pleasing the real “connoisseurs”, in contrast to “professional artists”—who want to provide entertainment for mass audiences and earn good money (*ibidem*).

However, since the school changed its status from a college under the Department of Culture to the autonomous university, many things have changed and made this objective difficult. The former system ensured more flexibility to teach a concrete skill or a composition properly. Students had only one *guru*, who rigidly followed tradition. A strict syllabus has imposed a necessity to complete a defined class program within semester cycles.³³

Due to the limited budget for programs, there are not many Kathak performances staged in Lucknow. Every year Kathak Samaroh is organized by the Cultural Department of Uttar Pradesh and Rashtriya

³² Similarly, hereditary Kathak dancers in Delhi represent a negative approach toward choreographic “fusions”. Birju Maharaj tied a *ganḍā* (a string tied on a wrist of a disciple by his teacher as part of the initiation rite— *ganḍā bandhan*) only to those of his disciples who do not mix Kathak with other dance techniques (Birju Maharaj, pers. comm., New Delhi, February 18, 2015).

³³ Students learn a particular rhythm (*tāl*) during one term, forgetting the other ones, which they practiced in previous semesters. Because of a required minimum number of students in the class, they are being shifted to other classes and becoming confused with the divergent knowledge they receive from various teachers.

Kathak Sansthan. Kathak is also presented on the occasion of the Holi festival, Bhatkhande Jayanti (a three-day festival held in August on the occasion of Bhatkhande's birthday) and Lachhu Maharaj Jayanti (a celebration of the birthday of the first director of the institution, organized by Kathak Kendra at the turn of August and September). Hereditary *gurus* come from Delhi once a year to perform in Lucknow, whereas they regularly appear on the proscenium in the capital. Local teachers also complain that prominent masters do not come here for workshops since the parents of local students could not afford to pay them as much as they can earn in other big cities, such as Mumbai or Kolkata. Delhi provides better money, because of many opportunities to perform for large audiences, therefore many hereditary dancers from Lucknow moved there and made the capital their new "home".

In the opinion of Lucknow-based artists, Kathak in Lucknow is more emotional and closer to its roots, whereas Kathak in Delhi became more technical and mathematical. Over there, Kathak became faster and sharper, losing much of its delicacy and sweetness (Veena Singh, pers. comm., Lucknow, April 9, 2015). Though Lucknow city has changed a lot over recent decades, it has maintained some atmosphere of bygone times, shaping the nostalgic will to preserve the dance in its traditional format. Poverty seems to be an additional factor that also prevents excessive modernization of the dance in Lucknow. Only those of the artists who tour abroad give their Kathak a bit of a cosmopolitan touch, but it is carefully dosed—depending on the authorities sitting among the audience. By comparison, the dancers from Ahmedabad or Bangalore, who engage in innovative productions, are basically coming from the upper class and are well exposed to cosmopolitan lifestyles. The production and commercial success of experimental choreographies is often supported by an influential family, a professional manager and a network of international connections. Thus, the disciples of the same *guru* may carry forward Kathak legacy into many different paths and horizons, depending on their education, mobility, social status, financial resources and geographical location.

Conclusions

In the spatially expanding Kathak world there are divergent attitudes and opinions concerning the extent to which a tradition can be contemporized in reaction to globalization. Hereditary *gurus* emphasize the need to preserve the “traditional form” presented by them, though they themselves have introduced numerous innovations to it. The conservative groups seem to be particularly skeptical about experiments based on remixing Kathak with other dance forms, exposing sexuality in dance (through “vulgar” movements and gestures) and touching “inappropriate” topics, such as violence or politics. In their view, some contemporary issues can be presented in Kathak through the use of metaphors and traditional dance vocabulary.³⁴ The hereditary dancers who teach at the Kathak Kendra in Delhi intend to shape good soloists, however, the concert halls of the capital and national dance festivals are apparently dominated by group choreographies—a trend imported from Western methods of creating a choreography (ballet). Actually, the process of classicization in Kathak has already imprinted the dance with cultural hybridity, which now increasingly drenches this tradition in a variety of directions.

Many hereditary *gurus* contend that an accomplished dancer, possessing a good command of musical skills and *abhinay*, is able to showcase unlimited creativity and freely improvise without exceeding traditional conventions. However, the conditions of contemporary training in institutions appear to be incompatible with the purpose of shaping artists of such a high-caliber. Though the syllabus of Kathak Kendra includes vocal and tabla / pakhavaj classes, their level and frequency is not sufficient to fulfill the set objectives. Theoretical classes seem to consume time which could be spent on more practical dance exercises.

³⁴ For instance, to draw attention to the problem of water pollution, conventional motive of *Kāliya mardana* (in Hindu mythology: killing of aquatic monster Kāliya, who poisoned waters of Yamuna, by Kṛṣṇa) has been used. Multiple characters from *Mahābhārata* are also presented as metaphors for reflection on the human nature.

Thus the institutional training, claiming to be the continuation of the traditional system (legitimized by the presence of *gharānedār gurus*), but largely borrowing from Western patterns of classical dance education, shapes non-traditional approaches to the cultural practice of Kathak. Furthermore, global markets tend to turn Kathak art and classes into a commodity (Chakravorty 2006: 128), with the defined parameters, price, patent, or copyrights. The *gharānās* continue to be an essential element of the discourse on tradition, but at the same time, they are also becoming a quality measure of the product.

On the one hand, there are attempts to set the tradition in a particular region through a historiography limited to a particular area and contextualize its qualities in reference to the culture of the region, its political and religious conditions in the past—pointing to the continuance of the heritage—as it has kept the spirit of the “old” civilization. Two discourses of Indian and Hindu nationalism are intermingling here, the regional diversity is represented as the three *gharānās* symbolize various shades of “Indianness”. On the other hand, as Kathak expands on global stages and in schools, its exposure causes the influx of Western ideas and practices into the tradition, that—together with performers—overflow into the Indian market. Therefore, the young generation of Kathak dancers transgress the borders of tradition in various ways and redefine its parameters, in an attempt to find their own place in the increasingly transcultural community of dance professionals.

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